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Wichers, Neil E Oral History Interview: Tulip Time

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The Hope College Oral History Project for 1995
The Joint Archives of Holland

Interview #1
Mrs. Nell E. Wichers
The Oral History of Tulip Time

Conducted by:
Jason Valere Upchurch
29, May 1995

Oral History of Tulip Time

Interview #1

- Interview with Nell E. Wichers @ The Inn at Freedom Village
- 145 Columbia Avenue / Holland, MI 49423
- 30 May, 1995
- Interviewer: Jason V. Upchurch

Begin Tape 1 : Side 1

JVU: Alright, so if you could just say your name.

Wichers: Okay, I am Nell Wichers, wife of the former Willard Wichers who was at one time manager of Tulip Time, and served on the board of Tulip Time for many years.

JVU: Okay. and if you could give me--if you want to--your date and place of birth.

Wichers: Well . . .

JVU: You don't have to.

Wichers: I can. I was born in Ottawa County in 1906.

JVU: Okay so you've been in this area . . .

Wichers: Well I had all my education in Vriesland and in Zealand, and then I took nurses training at Blodgett Hospital in Grand Rapids, and practiced public health nursing at the Grand Rapids Health Department for several years before getting married to Bill [Wichers].

JVU: Okay. And now my first question is, what is the nature of your association with Holland or with Tulip Time? And I guess that is through your husband.

Wichers: The nature is, of it is mostly through my husband. He had already become involved before we were married, by collecting some historical things and having a display which was the beginning of the Netherlands Museum. And he started that even before we were married; very early in Tulip Time, and that is how he became involved.

JVU: Okay, so he was then associated early on with the Dutch culture side of Tulip Time?

Wichers: Right, and the history of Holland.

JVU: The history of Holland? Okay, how long was he in that position for?

Wichers: Well he worked for the Netherlands government for over forty years as [an] officer of Cultural and Information Services.

JVU: And he was working here then? His Office was here?

Wichers: His office was in the City Hall of Holland, Michigan, and it was a branch of the Netherlands Information Service which was based in New York City but responsible to the ambassador in Washington, D.C.

JVU: And what was the function of that office?

Wichers: Well, information.

JVU: Just back and forth because of the Dutch population here?

Wichers: Not back and forth, but he was the director of that organization for the Midwest twenty states, and sent releases to all the newspapers in those twenty states and radio stations and T.V. stations.

JVU: I guess you have been involved either directly or indirectly with Tulip Time for a long time.

Wichers: Right.

JVU: What significant changes have you noticed in the festival?

Wichers: Well, it's been . . . formerly, parking for private cars was the biggest problem and it's not true anymore because there are many, many busses now, and it seems [to me] that it's become a festival for bus tours.

JVU: And that wasn't so in the past?

Wichers: There were always busses, but not like there are now.

JVU: And is that the only change that you've noticed? What about in the . . . not so much the festival itself, but in the people who come to visit, the numbers of people?

Wichers: The only things that haven't changed are the Klompen Dancers and the Street Scrubbing. But the entertainment--the type of entertainment--and that sort of thing has changed considerably.

JVU: Which changes do you notice the most? As far as the live

entertainment goes? The people who come in?

Wichers: Well, right after the war when Holland Furnace was still in active industry, they would bring Hollywood celebrities here, and that sort of thing, which is quite different from the entertainment they have now. Not that it was better, but it was different.

JVU: Your husband then was very involved with Dutch culture both here and overseas, and the communication between them. Do you think that Dutch pride in Holland has effected Tulip Time, or do you think that Tulip Time has brought a rise in Dutch pride in the town?

Wichers: I think it's the pride that the Dutch have that got Tulip Time started, and kept it going.

JVU: One article that I read mentioned that three of the four original people who started Tulip Time, weren't even Dutch, and I thought that was sort of interesting. But then, the town people seemed to pick the whole festival up and keep it alive.

Wichers: That's right. That also relates to the windmill. The gentleman that came to my husband's office and said, 'We need a windmill,' he was not Dutch. His name was Mr. Carter Brown.

JVU: Is that right?

Wichers: That's right. And my husband said, 'Well, I have a plan right here that we can build one,' and he [the man] said, 'No. I mean we should have one from the Netherlands.' And my husband said, 'Well, they're protected. They don't let them out of the country.' But he didn't want to take no for an answer, and he had several backers with money to send Bill to the Netherlands to see what he could do. It took three trips on the part of my husband to convince the Dutch people that we were entitled to a windmill here.

JVU: Three separate trips over seas?

Wichers: Yes.

JVU: When did he finally bring it back over here with him?

Wichers: In 1965.

JVU: 1965. You don't know what he said to the to convince them?

Wichers: Well, I think the ambassador at that time, Ambassador VanRoijen and his wife, were very much in favor of a windmill coming here, and I think he intervened. There is a windmill committee in the Netherlands with which to deal, and I think he convinced them that [on that] last trip that Bill made, that they should say yes.

JVU: And that is the windmill that now is at Windmill Island?

Wichers: Right.

JVU: Did he have anything else to do with the production over at Windmill Island; building up the replica town?

Wichers: No, that was a whole committee that made those decisions, and so forth. They did import a windmill expert from the Netherlands to decide where it should go, where it would get enough wind so it would really work. And then also, they had a mill wright from the Netherlands come and build it; put it back together again. It was 200 years old when they bought it, so it is the historic mill.

JVU: My next question I guess would be . . . Holland has become, or has started to have a trend towards being a little bit more ethnically diverse. There's people moving in from ethnic backgrounds; the hispanic population is growing . . .

Wichers: They used to say we were like Ivory soap, 99% pure Dutch, but we're far from that. I don't think [we] even are 50% Dutch in Holland anymore. I'm sure it's less than that.

JVU: How do you see that effecting Tulip Time? Not at all? Very strongly?

Wichers: Very little I think. The people who, the ethnic groups who have joined us seem to enjoy Tulip Time, and seem to go along with it, and like to wear the costumes and so forth.

JVU: I noticed this year, there was a float, an ethnic diversity float in the parade with children on it.

Wichers: This was a good many years ago, but Queen Juliana visited here and that was during the war--the second world war. There was a third grade class that sang a Dutch song for her, and she was so amused. There was a little American Indian girl

wearing a Dutch costume singing the Dutch song to her.

JVU: Now who was in charge of that? Who arranged the singing of that song?

Wichers: Well, it was my husbands idea to contact the school, and the school decided which class would sing the song and so forth.

JVU: So it was your husband's idea to have them sing? I think I've heard this story. Was it that [the song] was one of her favorite songs that they sang for her rather than singing the Dutch national anthem?

Wichers: I'm not sure. That I can't quite comment on.

JVU: I know I've heard that story before. My next question has to do with the popularity of Tulip Time. It's grown, it's gotten a lot of national acclaim. I think it's the fifth largest festival in North America right now?

Wichers: And the third largest flower festival.

JVU: I didn't know that. Why do you think it has gotten so popular?

Wichers: Well, I think it's because of the nature of the festival, it's not like some festivals have become a carnival. It's just a simple festival where tulip is queen.

JVU: And you think people appreciate that?

Wichers: I'm sure they come primarily to see the tulips, and then enjoy the Klompen Dancing especially, and especially the first parade.

JVU: That would be the Volks parade?

Wichers: The scrubbing the streets.

JVU: And how do you think it grew to such national popularity? I know you said that people appreciate it's so simple, but how do you think the word got out? It seems to me it's such a phenomenon that this is such a small city when you compare it to other midwestern cities like Chicago and Minneapolis, that a festival like this has such popularity throughout the country. I'm wondering how you think it spread.

Wichers: Well I think it's just the context that the first committee made. They invited . . . at that time, they invited

Life Magazine and some other magazines to come and take pictures, and they found it so unique that they used their pictures and they gave it national advertising of course, and it just seemed to grow like topsy.

JVU: What year was that, that the magazines came in?

Wichers: The first few years after the war, 1945 to 1950 or longer.

JVU: Alright. I think you may have already answered my next question. It was who did you know, or do you know that played a major role in Tulip Time? I guess that would be your husband, beyond any doubt. Was there anybody else that you can think of, that played a major role?

Wichers: Well, people from the Sentinel and the Chamber of Commerce; organizations of that kind did a lot to promote it.

JVU: I have one more question, and that is what is your favorite part of Tulip Time?

Wichers: The tulips and the Klompen Dancers.

JVU: Okay, and if there's anything else you want to . . . any other stories you can think to share?

Wichers: The costume show was always a big drawing card too. I don't think they call it that any more, but it used to be that the Woman's Literary Club promoted a costume show that some of the ladies that were members had beautiful costumes; some were actually from the Netherlands. But that has been pretty much taken over by the people who are active in the Netherlands . . . the D.I.S., the magazine for the Dutch Immigrant Society. The members of that society put the show on now, so they do have very authentic costumes, and it's a very nice show. But it's more than just a costume show, but it's successful and very good; just different than the original.

JVU: What year was that? What year did that being?

Wichers: When the Immigrant Society took it over? I don't know.

JVU: Yeah, or when the costumes began being authentic?

Wichers: There were always a few, I think. From day one.

JVU: I don't know what else to ask, I've asked all my questions.

If you can think of anything else you'd like to share, any specific memories that you have.

Wichers: I can comment on when my husband was manager of the tulip festival. It was from '45 to '50.

JVU: That would be good.

Wichers: You know they didn't have it during the war; not at all. So the first year after we had peace, he was asked to get it started again, and the first year it had quite a few problems. That year, the park department went on strike around May 1, and so there was the possibility that the tulips would not be cared for well. That was settled in time, and the local Holland Rusk Factory went on strike, so then all the people who were going to serve all the hamburgers were in trouble. There were all kinds of little details like that, that were difficult in getting it back on schedule again.

JVU: Now this was all at the same time that he was still director of . . .

Wichers: Oh yes, he was Tulip Time manager; it was just a sideline. He was actually the officer for the Netherlands government, officer of information.

JVU: Was he doing anything else at that time?

Wichers: No that was over twenty states, so that was a big job. He traveled an awful lot, and he was sent to the Netherlands every other year to be brought up on their improvements and what was happening in their country. He would go every other year, for about six weeks, and visit every province and get all the up to date news.

JVU: Did he have anybody working for him when he was doing all of these things?

Wichers: Oh yes, he had an assistant and a secretary, and two or three other ladies that helped with the correspondence and the filing; all of the things that have to be done in an office.

JVU: Were there any other people that helped him with Tulip Time in particular?

Wichers: Well there's always a Tulip Time board to which the

manager is responsible, and they're a big help.

JVU: And who was serving on that at the time? Do you recall?

Wichers: That I don't remember. When he was manager I don't remember, but after that he served on the board for a good, good many years.

JVU: So he's really been a key figure over the years here.

Wichers: Yes, he was.

JVU: I guess that's it, unless you know of any other people you'd like to talk about, or anything that you yourself were involved with personally with Tulip Time.

Wichers: Well, I always had a lot of entertaining to do.

JVU: I'd like to hear about that.

Wichers: Well, there were quite a few Dutch officials would come for Tulip Time, and we would have city officials in to meet them, and entertain them that way. There was one year, they had KLM bring--I don't know how many families, I think something like three--families into Grand Rapids. That was just to demonstrate the difference that immigrants now flew here, and the first ones took sixty days on the ocean to get here. It made quite a good program.

JVU: That was part of the Tulip Time program?

Wichers: Yes. KLM landed at Grand Rapids. That was actually before it was an international airport. That was soon after the war, when there was quite an influx of immigrants here because the churches and families and relatives sponsored them. There were a lot of people immigrated at that time.

JVU: Was that through your husband's office, that program?

Wichers: You mean the program of these people coming by plane? Yes, he arranged that with KLM. They got the advertising and Tulip Time benefitted.

JVU: Did you ever do any entertaining of any of the officials at your own home here in Holland?

Wichers: Yes, I entertained Princess Margarite and her husband.

JVU: That's interesting. How was that?

Wichers: It was quite a responsibility, but it was nice to do.

They were actually guests of the city, but ours was a stop-off place for her to rest for a bit because of the change of time. She came to our city from Chicago, and that was an hour's difference in time, and also she had arrived in Chicago just a couple of days before from the Netherlands, and the time change, so ours was just a rest stop. We had the city officials there to greet her, and the Tulip Time board and some people like that, and had refreshments.

JVU: Oh, that's interesting. That's quite a moment for you.

Wichers: You probably see what was my former home frequently, because we lived on the corner of Central Avenue and Graves Place. The Central Avenue Christian Reformed Church is one corner, and we're just across the street. That red brick, square house. That is my former home, and now my grandson lives there. So that's where we did all of the entertaining. But it did seem that any Dutch officials that came as far as Washington, one thing they wanted to be sure and do while they were in this country was be sure to see Holland, Michigan. It seemed to be quite a drawing card for them. So that's why we had a great deal of entertaining to do.

JVU: You said your husband was the one who started the Netherlands Museum?

Wichers: Yes.

JVU: How long was he in charge of that for? How long did he curate?

Wichers: He was the director . . . let me see, he's been gone four years. I don't know the exact year. First there was a gentleman director, Reid VanSluys, that was here for two or three years, and then Ann Kiewel who is the director now. There was just one director between Ann Kiewel and my husband; a gentleman was here, I think, for three years. But so he was director of that for . . .

JVU: A long time.

Wichers: Yeah. Forty some years. Forty years or more.

JVU: Was a large portion of the collection that they had there

his own?

Wichers: No. It was property of other people that wanted it to be in the museum. And then, the World's Fair was in New York . . . what year was that? You'll have to look that up, you're a historian. You can find out when the World's Fair was in New York, and then . . .

JVU: Was it in the fifties?

Wichers: No it was just before the war.

JVU: Oh before, okay.

Wichers: Then some of the things could not be sent back to the Netherlands because their ships were being attacked, because of the war. And then some of those things came to the Netherlands Museum which was a big plus for them, and they still have those things on exhibit now.

JVU: Oh it was property of the Netherlands that had been at the World's Fair, that couldn't be sent back, so it was sent here? I see.

Wichers: If you go to the museum, they can tell you which pieces they are.

JVU: Oh, they still have them now?

Wichers: Yeah, they're all on exhibit.

JVU: And that was while your husband was in charge of things? Okay. Did he ever have any support from the Netherlands, in setting up the museum? Did they play any role in that?

Wichers: They were very much in favor of his, of that being part of his work and his being director of the museum, even though that didn't really fit into his information work. They highly approved of his being director of the museum, and wanted him to be a success.

JVU: And how did the museum contribute to Tulip Time over the years?

Wichers: Well, because it was a fine exhibit and very popular. That was one way they made enough money to keep going.

JVU: Oh, every Tulip Time needed . . .

Wichers: The Tulip Time admissions.

JVU: Okay. And did the Netherlands government ever, besides when they would send people over to attend Tulip Time, did they ever make any recognition of it? Did the Netherlands government ever give any support for Tulip Time other than sending people over to attend?

Wichers: Not financial.

JVU: Not financially? No? So publicity?

Wichers: Publicity, and . . . no, other than permitting my husband to participate in management and in the museum and so forth, that was their contribution.

JVU: Okay.

Wichers: Of course the Tulip Time Board orders all of their tulips from the Netherlands.

JVU: Still, today they do that?

Wichers: Oh yes.

JVU: I guess that would be an interesting thing to talk about. When your husband was director of tulip time, was he in charge of ordering the flowers, or was there a grounds crew that was?

Wichers: The Tulip Time board, the people at the Park Department were in charge of that.

JVU: So then that would be another way that the Netherlands supported the festival, by letting us buy flowers from them I guess.

Wichers: Right. In the last few years that my husband was active, the garden club was very generous, and they arranged to have a tulip named for him. So there is a Willard Wichers tulip.

JVU: Do you know what it looks like?

Wichers: Pardon? Oh certainly, I have some, there's some planted in the yard where I told you I used to live. Each year there's a large bed of them in Centennial Park.

JVU: What color are they?

Wichers: They're a pinkish red. I have a photograph of it in my village apartment, but not here in this room. It's a very pretty, tall, rosy red tulip.

JVU: Well that's nice. Do you know that . . . or do you know if,

if I were able to ask your husband who some of the pivotal people in his Tulip Time experiences were, the people who helped him the most, do you know what names he might give me?

Wichers: Oh sure. He would certainly mention Nelson Bosman, who was the former mayor--he was the mayor for ten years--he was on the Tulip Time board, I think as long as my husband was, and he had very many good ideas and was most helpful. And William VandeWater, who was a newspaper man. He was very active and helpful, and at one time was with the Chamber of Commerce. And another thing that helped to promote Tulip Time, you know we have had a float in the Rose Bowl parade, and the mayor at that time was Louis Hallacy; he managed to get the float into the Rose Bowl parade and he too was always very active in Tulip Time and helpful to my husband, and he's still with the Chamber of Commerce.

JVU: Oh, still today? Okay. Well, unless you have anything you want to add, I think . . .

Wichers: No, I think I've done a lot of talking.

JVU: Oh I think so. Very helpful, very informative.

Wichers: That's good.

[People enter room]

JVU: I think you might have company.

Wichers: Yup, come on in.

[People]: Here for Joe Derks (neighbor to Mrs. Wichers)

JVU: They're for your neighbor.

[Brief discussion of company expected by Mrs. Wichers]

JVU: Well, I thank you for this; this will be very helpful. I guess I can shut this down now. That's the end of the interview.

-End interview-